

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE H-1

WASHINGTON POST
2-June 1985

ART BUCHWALD

The War We Lost In Nicaragua

WASHINGTON, D.C., June 15, 1999—Officials and veterans gathered in the nation's capital today to celebrate "Nicaraguan Remembrance Day" and honor the more than 200,000 American GIs who died in the recent war in Central America.

The ex-GIs, dressed in old khaki, some wearing combat boots and medals, marched from the steps of the Capitol to the recently completed memorial overlooking the Potomac.

The war, which began during the second term of Ronald Reagan and was continued by two other presidents, ended in a stalemate with the withdrawal of American troops after a decade of fighting.

An estimated 535,110 fighting men on both sides and 1,620,000 civilians died during the bloody police action.

Many of the ex-GIs who participated today were bitter about the way they had been treated on their return from Nicaragua.

Ex-chief petty officer Clyde Durban had served on the destroyer escort Fishbait, the vessel that President Reagan claimed had been fired on by a Nicaraguan PT boat. It was because of this incident that the president asked for a "Gulf of Fonseca Resolution," which he said gave him the legal justification for ordering the U.S. Marines to invade Managua.

Durban said, "It was nighttime and we never did see the ship that was supposed to have attacked us in the Gulf of Fonseca. Some of the guys on board the Fishbait said they thought it was a fishing boat shooting up flares. We never dreamed the United States would go to war over it."

Former infantry lieutenant Harvey Robinson, who had been wounded at the Battle of San Rafael del Norte, tried to find the names of his buddies on the memorial wall. "It was Vietnam all over again," he said. "We were able to get control of the cities, but the Commies held the countryside. We'd wipe out a jungle hideout and as soon as we moved on, they would move back in. We didn't know which civilians were for us and which ones were against us. So after a while we started shooting at anybody who looked suspicious. When we couldn't hold on to real estate, Washington demanded body counts. Based on the counts, every president since Reagan promised we'd be home by Christmas."

Ex-captain Robert Simpson, who was shot down in a helicopter by a Soviet missile near Jinotega and held prisoner by the Sandinistas for four years, was bitter because so many American boys refused to go when President Reagan asked Congress to reinstitute the draft in September 1986.

He said, "After the October riots when an estimated 3 million kids declared they would go to jail rather than fight in Nicaragua, the president had to backtrack on his call for national conscription. So this left the professional military people and the unemployed to fight the dirty little war. We got our butts shot off while the guys back home were earning big bucks and getting the best jobs. 'Nicaraguan Remembrance Day' doesn't mean diddly beans to the guys who were there."

George Shultz, who was Ronald Reagan's secretary of state at the time of the "Gulf of Fonseca Resolution," and is now teaching diplomacy at the University of Chicago, told reporters he still feels the United States did the right thing by invading Nicaragua. "At the time, Congress would not support the freedom fighters in Honduras, nor CIA efforts to destabilize the Sandinista government. So we had no choice but to get our American boys directly involved. The price may have been higher than we predicted, but we kept tyranny from being exported to Haiti. In spite of the casualties, the important thing is that President Reagan sent a strong message to the Russians that he would do everything to maintain his credibility. I'm sure that if faced with the same set of facts, Ronald Reagan would not hesitate to throw our boys into Nicaragua again."

© 1985, Los Angeles Times Syndicate